

# GEM HOY “HARRY” LEW

## **Oral History: EDITED VERSION**

Birth Date: December 6, 1935

Interview EI-315 by Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., on May 17, 1993

Immigrated from Hong Kong, China, at the age of 15

Arrived in the US on Pan-American Airlines in 1951

**Read the oral history. Then discuss the questions with your group.**

*The Chinese Exclusion Act used to stop Chinese people from entering the US at all. In 1943, the law was changed to let 105 ethnic Chinese into the US each year. Many people came from China who said they were American citizens, but few could prove it. Some came to the U.S. as “paper sons,” claiming to be the child of legal immigrants. Harry Lew stayed at Ellis Island for two months, where he had to answer all sorts of questions.*



*Harry, about 16, doing homework.*

**SIGRIST:** This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Monday, May 17, 1993. I’m at 65 Mott Street in Manhattan with Harry Lew, who was born in Canton, China. Was your father born in the United States and then went to China?

**LEW:** Yes, I think so. I think he was born in California, and he went back to China, see, and got married. And some of my brothers were born in China, and some, they were born in this country. And some of them came to the United States earlier than I do. I was left behind in China, and another older brother left behind in China, too. And after the war, in 1951, ‘52, we started to come back to this country.

**SIGRIST:** Was your father's laundry in California or in New York?

**LEW:** In New York. I don't know too much about him, actually. When I, I got back here in two or three years he passed away, so actually I don't, I never knew my father.

**SIGRIST:** What were some hardships that you...had to endure?

**LEW:** I remember that I was a kid, during the Second World War. We were attacked by the Japanese. We always hide in the mountain, and I can remember that. We don't have a good life when I was a kid. Oh, it was a very hard living because we don't have a decent meal all the time for two or three years. Always hiding, always running away from the Japanese. We don't have a good education. Every time we start a new term of education, the Japanese come, see, and we had to run. That was the hardest thing that I ever remember as a youngster, always try to save our lives, try to hide from the Japanese.

**SIGRIST:** What kinds of places would you live in at that time?

**LEW:** That was the worst time, because our place was occupied by the Japanese, and they killed Chinese. You couldn't take all your belonging. It's the worst thing that happened. When I was a youngster, I can always remember just always hiding away, running away during the Second World War. Scary.

The whole village [was about] sixty to seventy people. The luckiest ones run away from the Japanese. Some of them did not run. They were killed, you know. A lot of them, old person, when we came back they were shot to death, see. In my mind, this is a horrified thing, always in my mind as a youngster, I remember this.

Why didn't Harry know his father very well?

What conflict was going on in China while Harry was going to school?

What did he have to do during the conflict? How did that affect his schooling?

**SIGRIST:** So when the war ended, you moved to Hong Kong.

**LEW:** We moved to Hong Kong, and we had a better life there, too. At that time in Kowloon, part of Hong Kong, we live in small apartment, one room, three people lived in there. My father sent money back then, so we were able to afford ourselves. And I attended school in Hong Kong. I was a year or two years behind the regular kids because I did not have my formal education when I was six or seven years old, because those were the days that we were hiding in the mountain. So almost two years behind the normal kids in my education.



*Harry, age 10, in Hong Kong after the end of World War II.*

**SIGRIST:** How did you feel about going into school and you were more behind?

**LEW:** Well, I feel frustrated, but I tell myself I had to try to work harder because I was always two years behind those kids. I was stupid to those [kids]. So I always tried to work harder. Even in this country, I was at least two or three years, [because] I changed my language to a different language. I always had to work harder.

**SIGRIST:** Tell me a little bit about what the city [Hong Kong] was like after the war.

**LEW:** I see a lot of chaotic situation in Hong Kong too, because a lot of people didn't have their jobs. And a lot of stealing, you're walking in the street, you have something in your hand, somebody will go there and took your stuff away. Very chaotic in the first few months, because it's transition from a Japanese government to Hong Kong, uh, to British government. A lot of violence. People were attacking each other. It was very scary. **[NOTE:** The city of Hong Kong belonged to Great Britain from 1898-

1997. During World War II, the Japanese Army took it over. When Harry Lew and his family came to Hong Kong, the Japanese had left and the British were trying to take control again.]

[My mother] can't get a job. As a woman, see, she can't. So she stayed with us for two or three years, then my mother came to this country. Me and my brother stayed behind to get a formal Chinese education. So we stayed in boarding school for a few more years.

**SIGRIST:** You were sort of like little adults.

**LEW:** We were. It's a survival, a matter of survival. Because we hiding in the mountains maybe separated from our mother, we try to be independent, get our own selves, so we don't have too much problems, you know, taking care of ourselves.

**SIGRIST:** You said you went to boarding school, and what was that like?

**LEW:** Well, that give me a lot of encouragement and hope in the boarding school because the teacher was very, very kind to me. She know all the struggle and the trouble I had been, and give me extra attention to guide me for a better education, so I was very, very grateful for that woman, the teacher that taught me, she taught me extra. Give me extra hour after school, give me extra help so I could try to be ahead. I spent four years in a boarding school, and that give me other good work in math, science, history. I'm very, grateful for that, see.

**SIGRIST:** Were you inclined to learn easily, or did it come, was it harder for you?

**LEW:** No, as a matter of fact, when I come to this country they order basic science and math, I was easy to catch, to be, to catch on with all the homework, all the education in this country because thanks to the teacher who give me all the encouragement in China. I was able to do that math and catch up right away. Because all the math is all the same, the basic, the math, they all the same anyway.

After the war, where did Harry move with his family? Once the Japanese left, what government was in charge of this place?

How did the war affect his schooling? How did it make him feel?

Who was Harry grateful to? Why?

**SIGRIST:** What did you know about America when you were in China?

**LEW:** I knew that I had to go to this country sooner or later. I called on my imagination that America is a free country and a lot of opportunity, and it's freedom. It's the most inspiring that you have freedom, the freedom of choice, to do whatever you wish to do.

**SIGRIST:** Can you tell me about how the process was that you got over here?

**LEW:** Well, my father sent for me. Now, it's a very, very special at that time, the immigration law. I had to be in this country before I was sixteen. So that's why I cannot wait. Once I passed sixteen, I cannot

come to this country. So I was here two, one day or two days before my sixteenth birthday. It's all written in the immigration law. So I had to quit school, come to this country right away, before the age of sixteen.

**SIGRIST:** So where did you leave from? You flew from Hong Kong to where?

**LEW:** We stopped in Calcutta, London, Newfoundland and this country. So we only stopped by for a few hours, so I could take a look what Calcutta look like, and we passed the Kuwait desert. We stop London for a few hours, and I see London, and we come to New York. Oh, [it was] exciting, I mean, fantastic. It took about four days. You know, in 1950 it was...all propeller airplanes...I was never frightened alone. I was able to take care of myself from the past experience of the Japanese occupation of China in my village, so I was never frightened at all.

**SIGRIST:** And what airport did you land in, in America?

**LEW:** Uh, Kennedy, Kennedy. [**NOTE:** At the time, it was called Idlewild Airport.] You see, it's funny thing with this America, immigration law. In Hong Kong, the consulate approves your passport or your ticket or whatever. You are approved to come to this country. [Yet] after I landed in Kennedy Airport I met my father and my brothers and sisters, and [then] the immigration office took us to Ellis Island.

I still don't understand why they took me to Ellis Island for the processing. I mean, that sounds ridiculous, is it not? Now they do away with this, I mean, thank you. At that time it was a very ridiculous rule or law that people approved from other port of departure arrive and they were sent for further processing. It doesn't make sense.

**SIGRIST:** Who met you at Ellis, I mean, at the airport?

**LEW:** Almost the whole family. And a few minutes we had to say goodbye again. [They were] accompanied by an immigration officer, and he drove me to Ellis Island.

Why did Harry have to come to the US before he turned 16?

When he arrived in the US, where did he have to go? Why?

**SIGRIST:** How did you feel?

**LEW:** I feel really sad! I said, "What the hell's going on here?" I have no idea what happened to me. I don't expect it. I thought when I saw them I'll go home with them, see. And I was frightened. When I was there [at Ellis Island], people told me this is the way it is. I was crying, and they explained to me... You have to wait for your time for the bureaucracy, you know. It's not a couple of days. [It was] A couple of months!

**SIGRIST:** Well, tell me what happened at Ellis Island...where you slept and all of that...

**LEW:** In army barracks, bunk beds. One on top of each other. We have a room that had fifty guys, divided in smaller sections, one room. I met some of my friends, [who are] still friends right now. I had a good time there because we had nothing to do. In the morning we ate breakfast, then lunch, then dinner. After that, you're all free time. What do you do? You play chess and play ball, try to kill time, see? In fact, when I left Hong Kong I was less than a hundred pounds. When I get out of Ellis Island I weigh a hundred and fifteen. I gained fifteen pounds... They fed us and [gave us] nothing to do.

**SIGRIST:** Yes. How many people were detained there, do you think, at that time?

**LEW:** Well, I know there are at least two hundred Chinese. The Italian and the French, I don't know how many there are, because we do not live in the same quarters.

**SIGRIST:** Now, did they segregate people by nationality, or . . .

**LEW:** I think so. I don't know the other nationality, but I know all Chinese were with all Chinese, no other nationality. I think at least two hundred. Mostly from Hong Kong. I think ninety percent, ninety-five percent from Hong Kong. Not from the north, because everybody I talk to [spoke in the] same dialect.

**SIGRIST:** Did they let you outside of the building at all?

**LEW:** No, no. No outside. There's a corridor there. We never get outside. Always there is gates around here. We're never allowed outside. Always stayed in the same room. Go to the dining hall, they feed us, we go back to our living quarters or go outside, the corridor here. We...play chess, play cards. That's all the pastime we can have. Boring, for two months. There was no choice. And I got used to that kind of life. I mean, I've seen worse. How could it be worse than you hide in the mountains, right?

**SIGRIST:** You mentioned on your oral history form that you had had food fights.

**LEW:** Oh, yeah. Sometimes I seen people do that. I mean, they don't have it, they took their meal. Argument always going on, just like people in the prison. They gather together, they talk something insulting, and they start fighting. I seen people stay for six months. Those guys told me I was only two months, but I seen this guy's been there for four months already. When I left, that guy's still there. So more than six months. This is, maybe something wrong with their background or something. And those guys really get tense and aggravated, see...you say something insulting, "Hey, how come you stay," insulting language and they start a fight.

What did he do while he was there? What c

**SIGRIST:** Were you afraid of being sent back?

**LEW:** Of course. You know, they ask you different kinds of questions, questions like, uh, your sisters' children, their name, their birthdays. I mean, how can people remember that? I mean, you had brothers and sisters, right? And their kids? Can you imagine their kids, and their kids' birthdays? I mean, sometimes you don't remember that thing! Every single brothers, their kids, the birthdays, you have to remember that. So you write it down on a piece of paper and remember that. So when the immigration officer asks you that kind of question, try to tell them exactly what it is. You pick the wrong date, hey, you get sent back to China, see. I mean, it sounds ridiculous.

**SIGRIST:** Do you think that they were looking for some sort of information about that? For instance, were you a Communist, or something along those lines?

**LEW:** Uh, no, I don't think so. It's more of whether or not you were a true father-and-son relationship. They asked questions about this thing. You say the wrong thing, and you[r answers] might be falsified.

**SIGRIST:** Were they harsh with you, or were they respectful of you?

**LEW:** You mean the immigration office? I wouldn't say they were nice, but it's their duty for their job to do that, see. You had to give them right answer or wrong answer. I wouldn't say harsh or nice or anything because this is their duty. It is their job to ask questions, to process...For other kids, they cry. They really get frustrated, see.

**SIGRIST:** What did you do for clothes during that time? Did they give you clothes?

**LEW:** No. We wear our own clothes. But we had to wash our laundry by hand. They have a big washroom. They give us a couple of soaps, and we wash our own clothes.

**SIGRIST:** So you're there till February of '52. Tell me about how you got off, finally.

**LEW:** Well, I was interrogated by the immigration officer and what I said was correct. They said, "Okay, you, you can go." So I, they informed my parents. They picked me up at the other end. So they said, "You're going to go by Sunday." So they called my parents, and they picked me up at the other end, see. They had a ferry boat. Because you can't just walk away from Ellis Island, right? (he laughs) So, I go by ferry boat and they come at the other end and pick me up. It was February, the day before Chinese New Year. I see the Chinese in New Year celebrating New York's Chinatown, just like in China. They had fireworks and dragon. Very happy.



Later on I see some of my friends from the Ellis Island, they're enrolled in Transfiguration [a school]. Fifty percent [of the students at the school] are Chinese at that time. The nuns are English. Very, very nice. After school they gave me special instruction in English, so I catch up in eighth grade. And then

they encouraged me to take the high school exam for Catholic high school. I was accepted in St. Francis Xavier High School, and they give me special admission because I was from China, I was a few years higher than those kids in high school. The other kids were fourteen, I was sixteen.

**SIGRIST:** What was the hardest thing about learning English?

**LEW:** Well, first you learn all the ABC's, you know, all the spellings, what does it mean. Once you master the spellings and usage, grammar... I would use the dictionary, Chinese, English to the Chinese, Chinese to English, and I try to look up what does it mean. And after you learn a few months like that it becomes quite easy to me.



*Harry graduates from Fordham University, 1960.*

**SIGRIST:** And your father's laundry business is doing well?

**LEW:** Well, we sold it after three years, and they passed away [both parents died]. I'm in a school. I'm working. I earned my own tuition. I pay it back. In fact, I was a waiter in the restaurant when I was attending high school. After I graduated I went to Fordham University for pharmacy school. Then I graduated there with a degree in pharmacy. Every summer...I worked. I worked my way through college.

I opened up [a pharmacy in Manhattan]...Business still is very good. We have Chinese patent medicine, patent medicine. They were well-known in China. We sell Tiger Balm, liniments and that sort of thing, see. A lot of very popular Chinese medicine.

What clues tells you that he liked Transfiguration school?

How did Harry pay for college?

*All photos above courtesy of the Lew family. Photo below by NPS.*



*Harry Lew in his pharmacy with daughter Karen, 2007.*

# GRAPHIC ORGANIZER for Ellis Island Oral History

**NAME** of immigrant: **Gem Hoy “Harry” Lew**

**FROM:** \_\_\_\_\_

**YEAR** he came to the US: \_\_\_\_\_

**AGE** upon arrival: \_\_\_\_\_

**PUSH-PULL:** What did he experience before he came to America?

